

Moby Dick: From fact to fiction

Table of Contents

Lesson 1: Seamen, sea stories, Ishmael and Queequeg.....	4
Preparing for launch.....	4
The whaleship	4
Bad omens for the <i>Essex</i>	4
The whaling trade and the whaleman's character	5
The origins of <i>Moby-Dick</i>	7
Melville's travels.....	7
Front matter: Voices from the past and across the sea	7
Ishmael.....	8
"Call me Ishmael"	8
"An everlasting itch for things remote"	8
A provincial island reaching to the corners of the earth	9
Ishmael's perspective.....	10
Queequeg.....	10
The savage	10
Queequeg the "bosom friend"	11
Making arrangements.....	12
Selecting a ship	12
Negotiating profits.....	12
Moving forward	12
Lesson 1, Assignment 1	14
Lesson 1, Assignment 2: Preparing for Lesson 2.....	15
Lesson 2: Life aboard the whaler and stories at sea.....	16
The men of the sea	16
The valiant whalemen.....	16
Officers and harpooners.....	16
Ahab.....	17
Rituals of passage: The cabin-table and the masthead	18
The cabin-table	18

The perilous masthead	18
Ahab's monomaniacal purpose.....	19
Monomaniacal purpose revealed	19
Grog and oaths	20
Whale tales	21
The legendary Moby Dick.....	21
Mocha Dick	22
Ishmael's affidavit.....	22
Gams and isolation.....	23
The <i>Town-Ho's</i> story.....	23
Moving forward	24
Lesson 2, Assignment 1: Getting underway: life aboard the <i>Pequod</i>	25
Lesson 2, Assignment 2: Preparing for Lesson 3.....	26
Lesson 3: In search of the whale	27
The hunt	27
Whale hunting.....	27
Hunter becomes the hunted	28
Anatomy of a whale	29
Observations.....	29
Philosophical observations.....	29
Portents and prophecies	30
Sticking together, moving apart	31
Sticking together	32
Moving apart.....	32
Property rights on the sea.....	33
The whaling code and property rights.....	33
"Loose-fish and fast-fish"	33
Moving forward	34
Lesson 3, Assignment 1: Searching for whales.....	35
Lesson 3, Assignment 2: Preparing for Lesson 4.....	36
Lesson 4: Anticipation and the final conflict	37
Man overboard, twice	37
Pip.....	37

Coins and symbols.....	38
The wooden captain and his living vessel	38
The doubloon.....	38
Anticipating the end	39
Omens: The stage is set	40
Reading the signs	40
Moral dilemmas.....	40
The musket.....	41
Lost sons	41
The chase and closing the circle	41
The captain's battle	42
Closing the circle	42
The prophecies are fulfilled.....	42
Reverberations	43
Sperm whales today.....	44
Moving forward	44
Lesson 4, Assignment 1: Moving on.....	45

Lesson 1: Seamen, sea stories, Ishmael and Queequeg

In this lesson, you'll "prepare for launch" by learning about the inspiration behind Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, and the history of the whaling trade. You'll also meet Ishmael and Queequeg as they prepare for the voyage.

Preparing for launch

Welcome to the course. Herman Melville's novel *Moby-Dick: or, the Whale* is a feat of imagination that has stood the test of time and successive generations of literary analysis. It's a remarkably detailed exposé of the whaling business and of shipboard life during a time when the four corners of the world were not yet fully explored, and when ships and shipping were a vital part of the world economy and a key element in the projection of nationalistic power. As if that weren't enough, Melville's ambitious novel is foremost an engaging drama that presents, in narrative form, ideas and theories about power, wealth, social systems and participatory democracy.

Moby-Dick is the short name for Melville's novel. "Moby Dick" is the name of the immense sperm whale encountered by the crew aboard the Pequod.

The whaleship

To understand *Moby-Dick*, it helps to understand the historical perspective of life aboard a whaling vessel. *Moby-Dick* was inspired, in part, by the sinking of the whaling vessel *Essex* in 1820. You'll gain insight into the history behind the sinking of the *Essex* and the whaling trade in general throughout this course, which will be invaluable in understanding *Moby-Dick*.

Seamen often possessed a belief system that was a curious mixture of hope and faith in a divine higher power along with a good dose of superstition. The *Essex* was said to have started its voyage under bad signs. As you read, you'll discover that the crew of *Moby-Dick* also holds a firm belief in signs and omens.

Bad omens for the *Essex*

In August 1819, the whaleship *Essex* departed from the island of Nantucket. It was bound for the warm waters of the Pacific, where sperm whales schooled in great numbers. The ship was the last of Nantucket's whaling ships to leave the harbor that summer. During nearly three months of major repairs and provisioning, ominous signs appeared for superstitious locals to remark and for wise sailors to heed: a comet appeared in the night sky while the ship was being repaired, and the ship was still in harbor when a plague of locusts attacked the crops of Nantucket's farmers.

Prior to these bad omens, the *Essex* had often been considered a lucky ship, and so it set sail with much fanfare and a crew of 21, including a number of crew members who were strangers to sea life (called **green hands**). Although every whaling expedition was inherently dangerous and required unusual physical fortitude and sacrifice, this rag-tag group soon faced unprecedented challenges that would turn at least some of them into heroes.



"Nantucket Farewell", the "Essex" Rounding Great Point, Nantucket (oil on canvas, L.F. Tantillo, 1999, www.lftantillo.com)

Fifteen months into the expedition, thousands of miles from home, in an ocean 64,000,000 square miles in size, the men of the *Essex* found themselves in an unprecedented situation: their ship had been attacked head-on by an 80-ton sperm whale almost 30 yards long. The damage created by this immense whale soon caused the ship to be flooded with water, and less than 48 hours later, the *Essex* had to be abandoned. For the next three months, 20 men would have to make do as best they could with just three 25-foot whaleboats. These small crafts, designed only for short-term use in the hunting of whales, would be their only lifeline.

Amazingly, a number of the *Essex*'s men survived to tell the tale, including the first mate, Owen Chase, and the ship's cabin boy, Thomas Nickerson. Much of what is known of the sinking of the *Essex* and life aboard a whaling vessel comes from these eye witness accounts to the event.

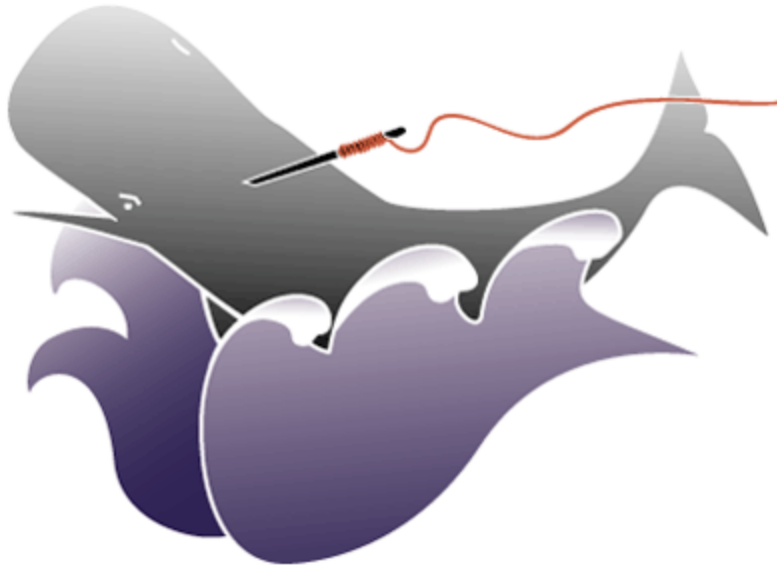
Despite bad omens or signs, whaling remained a lucrative business. It took more than just bad omens to cause a whaler or its stalwart crew to abandon its mission.

The whaling trade and the whaleman's character

The nineteenth-century whaling trade was big business. Sperm whales, in particular, could provide abundant oil of unsurpassed quality for the lamps and candles that lit the darkness of the world before the electric light was invented. This valuable oil provided the economic sustenance for the whaling communities of Nantucket and New Bedford in the first part of the century.

Whale hunting could be an immensely profitable endeavor for owners, investors and sailors, but it was fraught with risk. A single whaling voyage lasted more than two years with no guarantee of financial success. Imagine the hopes and fears of an investor in one of these uncertain ventures. More importantly, consider the plight of the crew members who manned the riggings and the whaleboats, never sleeping for more than four hours at a time, and who were only paid at journey's end—provided that the ship made it safely back home with a full load of oil.

The men of the whaleships suffered through the daily ebb and flow of their business. For the whalemen, days of waiting for the telltale spouts of a sperm whale would be succeeded by periods of frenzied activity: the dangerous hunt, in which the men might be injured or killed, followed, if they were lucky, by the labor-intensive butchering of the whale itself to remove its precious blubber and oil.



A harpooned sperm whale.

Whalemen were full of contradictions. They were a hardy class of men, but you'll start to see how the hazards of their vocation could affect their personalities. Officers who were part of polite society onshore could quickly become vulgar or threatening once aboard ship. Perhaps even more surprising is that Quakers often played leading roles in the violent business of whale hunting and of managing sailors, although as Quakers, they were sworn to pacifism and nonviolence.

The sea yields endless stories. In the same month that the *Essex* departed from Nantucket, Herman Melville, America's greatest teller of sea yarns, was born. Melville grew up to take part in a whaling expedition himself, but, more than that, he also participated in the whalemen's tradition of telling and retelling adventures. The story of the *Essex*'s encounter with an angry whale stirred Melville's imagination, and he spun it into his own myth of the sea: the novel *Moby-Dick*.

It is one thing to read about life aboard a whaling vessel or even to hear stories about the seafaring life; it's quite another to experience it firsthand. As you move forward, you'll learn about Melville and the influences of his real-life adventures aboard a whaling ship.

*Interested in a real life sailing adventure? If so, you may want to read **In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex** by Nathaniel Philbrick. The book uses first-hand accounts by surviving members of the Essex and other historical artifacts to fully document a series of "pre-destined" mistakes and dreadful miscalculations, as well as their tragic aftermath, in which the full range of the human condition is on display. You can read Owen Chase's and Thomas Nickerson's accounts of the wreck of the Essex and its aftermath in **The Loss of the Ship Essex, Sunk by a Whale**.*

The origins of *Moby-Dick*

Because Melville was born in the same month that the ill-fated *Essex* set sail on its final voyage, perhaps it was inevitable that he would take up seafaring and experience whaling for himself. In 1840, when he was not yet 21 years old, Melville joined the crew of a whaler and worked his way to the South Pacific, where he took up residence with the natives in the Marquesas Islands near Tahiti for several weeks. His experience as a whaleman and a traveler provided him with tremendous insight into both whaling and Pacific island cultures, which he would later use to great effect in such works as *Typee*, *Omoo* and *Moby-Dick*.

Melville's travels

The young Melville departed New Bedford on the *Acushnet*, and was quickly thrown into the hazards and hardships of life aboard a whaleship that acquired more than 450 barrels of oil in its first nine months at sea. The voyage gave Melville a chance to see some fascinating new sights as the ship traveled east towards Europe, and then caught the trade winds that would carry it down the eastern coast of South America. Melville could see amazing new reaches of the earth as the *Acushnet* rounded Cape Horn, on the southern tip of South America, and headed into the vast Pacific. Off the west coast of South America, 600 miles from Ecuador, the men of the *Acushnet* hunted giant tortoises on the Galapagos Islands.

As the trip continued, the ship's initial good luck in hunting dried up, and the captain grew more and more difficult to endure. When the *Acushnet* reached the Marquesas Islands, Melville and his friend Toby Greene deserted.

What Melville and Greene discovered on these tropical islands not only sparked the imagination of the young author, but also caused him to reconsider everything he thought he knew about civilized life. Years before, the shipwrecked crew of the *Essex* had decided not to head for the Marquesas Islands because they feared their inhabitants. Melville, in contrast, was enchanted by the people he met there. He considered their uninhibited lifestyle to be much more humane than that of the strict New Englanders he'd left behind. As Melville wound his way home, skipping from island to island and ship to ship, he increasingly questioned the conventional notions of what was proper.

Front matter: Voices from the past and across the sea

As you'll soon discover, *Moby-Dick* begins with a two-page review of the origin and meaning of the term *whale*, which is followed by an unusual introductory section entitled "Extracts." The Extracts supply a potpourri of quotes relating to whales and whaling, such as the following:

"Now the Lord had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah."

This collection of quotes gathers voices from the beginning of time itself, all the way up to the time Melville penned his classic whale story. The Extracts are an intriguing mixture of theology, myth, history, literature and science. Together they create a symphony of voices from the past and across the sea, all singing the praises of the epic dimensions of the whale. In the varied voices of the Extracts, the whale appears as a "dragon" and a "monster," as both the instrument of God's wrath (in the case of Jonah) and

the object of it. The whale (or **leviathan**) is also a metaphor for the state, but it is no symbol of stability: it has the power to make the ocean boil.

As the subject of the Extracts progresses toward Melville's century, you'll notice that the descriptions are increasingly authored by those who have studied or hunted the whale. The whale becomes an object of scientific inquiry, and also a source of precious oil, but it remains mysterious. Man had not yet conquered the whale, as references to the destruction it can cause (including the wreck of the *Essex*) attest.

The Extracts set the stage for the novel and create a great sense of anticipation about the mythical and mighty whale. Look for Melville's blending of fact and fiction as you read *Moby-Dick*.

The stage for *Moby-Dick* has been set. You should have some understanding of whaling vessels and how the sinking of the *Essex*, along with Melville's own seafaring experiences, inspired *Moby-Dick*. You are now ready to begin your seafaring adventure and meet your guide.

For the whalemens of these times, the tortoises on the Galapagos Islands were much more interesting as a source of food than as a basis for scientific inquiry; the Essex also had a stopover on the Galapagos Islands to gather them. Owen Chase records that these huge and "delicious" animals would be "strewed over the deck, thrown underfoot or packed away in the hold, as it suits convenience."

Ishmael

Every journey needs a leader and this one is no different—meet Ishmael. He'll provide you with a glimpse into the eccentricities of whaling towns as Ishmael and his new-found friend, Queequeg, prepare for their voyage. As you'll see, these two stand out even among the already unusual class of whalemens.

"Call me Ishmael"

With these famous words, you are introduced to the character who will be your trusted narrator and guide for the entire 600 pages and 18,000 nautical miles. You may be surprised to learn that Ishmael has a well-developed sense of humor to go along with his morbid streak.

When life is getting him down, when he finds himself "involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses," Ishmael decides it's high time he take to the seas. After all, he reasons, it's better than committing suicide. Although his point of view seems strange, he tells you that, in fact, all of humanity is like him: you all go to the ocean whenever you can because of your incurable curiosity to look beyond your landlocked daily lives.

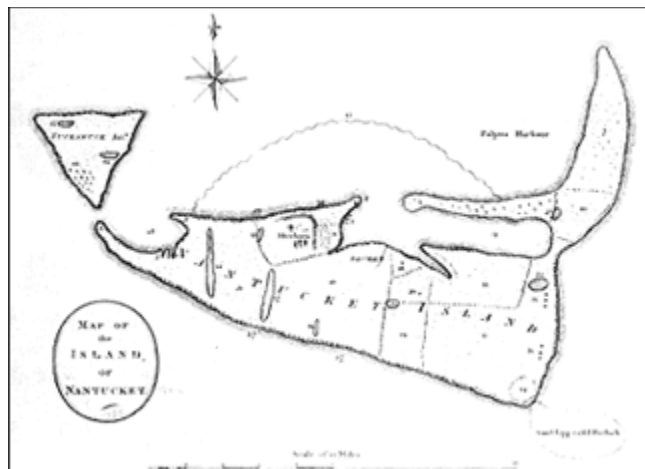
"An everlasting itch for things remote"

Ishmael gives you two contradictory reasons for his decision to go on a whaling voyage. On the one hand, he says that the Fates have ordained his decision. On the other hand, he credits his own inquisitiveness, especially his curiosity about the whale. From a certain point of view, Ishmael is a figure representing all humankind as he seeks knowledge about the distant corners of the earth and the

creatures that populate such remote regions. But Ishmael also stands apart from humanity. He takes his name from the biblical Ishmael, the son of Abraham and his handmaid, Hagar. In the Bible, the angel of the Lord tells Hagar that her son "will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man and every man's hand against him" (Genesis 16.12). Ishmael, the whaler, questions the values of society and is therefore an outsider, different in many ways from the people he describes.

Ishmael doesn't introduce just himself in the first few pages of *Moby-Dick*; he also introduces a number of the novel's most important ideas. As you continue your reading, be on the lookout for the role of the Fates, critiques of traditional Western values and an endless fascination with the mighty and majestic sperm whale.

As Ishmael begins to experience the "itch" calling him again to the sea, he seeks a whaling vessel on which to sign aboard. His journey will take him to New Bedford and Nantucket.



A map of Nantucket in the early nineteenth century.

New Bedford and Nantucket were the Northeastern U.S. centers for whaling. It is only natural Ishmael should journey to these towns while planning and preparing for his journey. Although by mid-century New Bedford had surpassed Nantucket as the center of whaling, Ishmael prefers to depart from Nantucket; the time-honored traditions and distinguished history of this remote Massachusetts island have an almost mystical charm over him.

A provincial island reaching to the corners of the earth

Nathaniel Philbrick's *In the Heart of the Sea* (which documents the story of the sinking of the *Essex* from eyewitness accounts) contains excellent descriptions of life in nineteenth century Nantucket. According to Philbrick, the whaling industry profoundly affected all aspects of the lives of the inhabitants of this intimate island community. The children of Nantucket played at the wharves and made-believe that they were hunting whales; the women of Nantucket had to develop a rare independence and strength of character because their seafaring husbands were gone for years at a time. Although this close-knit community often had to rely on "off-islanders" to fill its whaleships, the people of Nantucket formed a society tightly bound together by their tradition of whaling.

Ishmael's perspective

As *Moby-Dick*'s Ishmael wanders through New Bedford and Nantucket, he also takes you on a tour of communities whose every detail shows their devotion to the culture of whaling. The scenes Ishmael reports range from the comic to the ominous. You might grin at such particulars as a boardinghouse named "The Spouter-Inn," or a chapel full of nautical details, but Ishmael always reminds you of the darker side: the inn is run by a man named Coffin, and the walls of the chapel carry monuments to men lost at sea. Ishmael calls the men of Nantucket "emperors of the sea," but he also acknowledges the limits of that empire: it is full of human comedy even as it is built on human loss.

Ishmael asserts that you are all a little like Narcissus, the mythical man who drowned when he fell in love with his own reflection in the water. This is one of Ishmael's hints that Moby-Dick is about much more than an adventure at sea; you'll also find yourself mirrored in its waters, as you glimpse "the ungraspable phantom of life" that "is the key to it all."

Ishmael's journey to secure a post aboard a whaling vessel will soon lead him to another important and rather unique character in the novel—Queequeg.

Queequeg

Life upon the sea becomes its own microcosm of society. Shipmates depend on each other as if their lives depend on it and very frequently, they do. Ishmael is about to meet someone who, although rather unorthodox by the standards of the day, will become a friend Ishmael depends upon.

The savage

Ishmael gets some unpleasant news at the Spouter-Inn: if he wants to stay the night, he'll have to share the bed with a mysterious harpooner—who likes his steaks rare. As you might imagine, Ishmael's feelings about his sleeping companion do not improve when he learns that the unknown harpooner will likely stay out late selling embalmed heads. Your narrator's trepidation reaches a fever pitch when he finally lays eyes on Queequeg. This savage man has a skin color Ishmael has never seen, he's covered with tattoos and he has hardly any hair. More than that, he's sporting a tomahawk that makes Ishmael wonder if he's about to lose his own head!



Queequeg scrimshaw, by Robert Weiss (www.marinearts.com/rwgallery.htm).

Who is Queequeg, then? For Ishmael, he seems to represent all that is foreign. He sees "contrasting climates" on Queequeg's tattooed face, and he tells you that his new roommate came from the faraway island of Kokovoko—a place not to be found on maps, because "true places never are."

Moby-Dick's Queequeg is in fact a mixture of both fact and fiction. As Tim Severin shows in his book *In Search of Moby Dick*, Queequeg's character was no doubt inspired, at least in part, by Melville's own experiences in the islands of the South Pacific. Queequeg displays a number of authentic attributes of the islanders, such as his tattoos and his excellent swimming ability. But the suggestion of his cannibalism is likely more fancy than fact; the work of both Severin and Philbrick suggest that cannibalism in the South Pacific was more rumor than reality.

Queequeg the "bosom friend"

Despite Queequeg's somewhat unusual appearance and mannerism, Ishmael and Queequeg quickly form a close friendship. On one hand it's surprising, given how different they appear. But on the other hand, Ishmael is someone who is willing to question the society in which he lives. Befriending Queequeg is one way that Ishmael shows his openness.

Queequeg lives on the borders of polite society. Ishmael tells you that he "was just enough civilized to show off his outlandishness in the strangest possible manner," by shaving with his harpoon, for example, or putting his boots on under the bed.

In fact, his friendship with Queequeg enables Ishmael to make some piercing judgments of his own society. He compares Queequeg to George Washington, both because of his honesty and the "lofty bearing" of his head, and suggests that supposed savages can be much more civilized than some of the Christians of his day. Queequeg reinforces Ishmael's tendency to critique Western society, and helps him see how customs and values are relative to the individual society.

After their first night together, Ishmael awakens and discovers that the sleeping Queequeg has draped his arm around him. Ishmael quickly comes to share in his new friend's life, insisting that they sign up for the same whaling voyage. In search of new adventure, Ishmael is immediately ready to join his fate to Queequeg's; he may have just met the harpooner, but he feels almost as if they are married.

Queequeg isn't so readily accepted by the other people he meets, but in the end his skills (which are more important than ethnicity aboard a whaling vessel) win him the respect he deserves. On the trip from New Bedford to Nantucket, for example, a green hand taunts him because of his strange appearance. The tables turn, however, when Queequeg saves this heckler from drowning. Be on the lookout for the complicated ways in which different races are depicted in *Moby-Dick*. The incident on the way to Nantucket isn't the last time that conventional expectations are reversed in this novel.

With their newly formed friendship solidified, Ishmael and Queequeg now must select a vessel. It's an important decision because they will be spending the next two to three years at sea in close quarters with their shipmates.

Ishmael's analysis of western society is similar to Melville's own point of view. As Laurie Robertson-Lorant writes in her biography of Melville, "Seeing how militant missionaries in the South Seas were destroying a peaceful, non-Christian culture radicalized Melville. He began to question who the 'savages' were and who the 'civilized.'"

Making arrangements

Ishmael and Queequeg were now faced with an important decision, which would impact not only their long-term financial future but their day-to-day lives for the next few years. Which whaling vessel should they sign with? How do you go about making that determination?

Selecting a ship

As Ishmael and Queequeg plan their whaling voyage, they find themselves confronting both the will of the gods and the greed of local ship owners. At the instigation of Yojo, Queequeg's idol, Ishmael is given the task of selecting the ship. Is it Ishmael's morbid sensibility or the tug of the Fates that draws him to the *Pequod*, a ship named after an extinct tribe of Native Americans? In any case, once Ishmael has decided on a vessel, the plot leaves metaphysical speculations behind for the moment and turns to nitty-gritty economic details.

Negotiating profits

Each crew member of a whaling ship was given a **lay**, or a fraction of the profits earned by selling the ship's casks of whale oil. Whalemen were rewarded with lays that were proportionate to their level of experience and skill: less experienced whalemen were given "longer" lays (1/777, for example) and hence a smaller portion of the ship's profits than was given more experienced whalemen. If the voyage was unsuccessful, a whaler might not receive much at all in the way of compensation for his two to three years of service. In addition, all crew had to purchase necessities from the ship's store which later came out of their pay at the end of the voyage.

You'll observe as Ishmael and Queequeg negotiate for their share of the profits—their lays—for serving on the *Pequod*. Queequeg, because of his experience as a harpooner, is given a lay of 1/90 whereas Ishmael, who is inexperienced, receives a longer lay of only 1/300 (and hence, less share of the profits).

Although the depiction of Ishmael's negotiations gives you a humorous portrait of whaling convention, it also has a serious side. *Moby-Dick* is a novel that is very much concerned with how those in positions of power either value or exploit their fellow human beings. Later in the novel, Ishmael will raise his voice against the buying and selling of others, whether literal or metaphorical.

Moving forward

Everything has been prepared! In this lesson, you learned about whaling and the culture of the whaling community and how some of Melville's real-life whaling adventures influenced the novel. You also discovered how the sinking of the *Essex* partially inspired the writing of *Moby-Dick*. In the next lesson, you'll venture aboard the *Pequod* as it starts its whaling voyage, and you'll meet more of the whaleship's crew, including its officers and Captain Ahab. Before moving on, don't forget to complete the

assignments, one of which tells you which chapters to read in preparation of Lesson 2, and to take the quiz.

Did the two bickering captains, Bildad and Peleg, amuse you? They don't sail with the Pequod, but their clashing personalities should give you a good idea of what's to come when the whaleship begins its voyage.

Lesson 1, Assignment 1

Assignment instructions:

Based on the chapters you read for Lesson 1, and the topics covered in the lesson, address the following questions:

- How did Melville's experiences influence the novel? Are there any parallels between the novel and the events surrounding the sinking of the *Essex*?
- How do Ishmael and Queequeg fit into the whaling community? How do they fit into the larger nineteenth-century society? How do they stand apart?
- What kind of tone and mood does Ishmael establish in the opening pages of *Moby-Dick*? Did you feel drawn into the novel?
- What did you think about the name of the whaling vessel—the *Pequod*? Do you think that choosing a whaling ship named after an extinct tribe of Native Americans was a bad omen or foreshadowing of things to come in the future? In what ways?

Consider using a service like [Glogster](#) to create your journal. With your teacher's permission, you can create a multimedia journal for your ship's log assignment.

Lesson 1, Assignment 2: Preparing for Lesson 2

Assignment instructions:

To prepare for Lesson 2, read Chapters 19–54 of *Moby-Dick; or, the Whale* (Penguin Classics).

As you read, make a list of ways in which you think Melville depicts a typical whaleship. Are there any ways in which you think that the *Pequod* is atypical? How do decisions get made on the *Pequod*—tyranny, democracy or anarchy?

The *Pequod* represents in some ways the ambitions and promise of a young America. How does the following quote in Chapter 27 deepen your understanding of the new nation's inequalities?

*"As for the residue of the *Pequod's* company, be it said, that at the present day not one in two of the many thousand men before the mast employed in the American whale fishery, are Americans born, though pretty nearly all the officers are. Herein it is the same with the American whale fishery as with the American army and military and merchant navies, and the engineering forces employed in the construction of the American Canals and Railroads."*

Lesson 2: Life aboard the whaler and stories at sea

In this lesson, you'll learn about both the humor and "madness" of life aboard a whaling vessel. You'll also explore sea stories, both true and "tall" whale tales.

The men of the sea

Welcome back. In Lesson 1, you learned about the sinking of the whaleship *Essex* in 1820, as well as Melville's own real-life adventures aboard a whaling vessel and how these influenced and shaped the novel. You also met your guide, Ishmael, who took you on a tour of the whaling culture and communities of New Bedford and Nantucket. You observed as Ishmael and Queequeg began their fateful journey and mysteries ensued as they saw men entering the *Pequod* who quickly disappeared and were warned away from the ship by a strange, prophet-like figure.

In this lesson, you'll explore the social dynamics among the officers and crewmen of the *Pequod*; the quality of the working relationships established by the men aboard these ships will determine whether they succeed or fail, and even whether they live or die in their encounter with the unforgiving sea and the forces of nature. Whaling stories, real and legend, that were shared aboard the *Pequod* and other ships will also be examined. You'll also get a taste of what life on ship was like for the average seaman—difficult in the best of circumstances, and close to impossible with the Fates aligned against you.

The valiant whalemen

Whalemen did not always command the respect they deserved. Ishmael takes up the issue of the whalemen's reputation in Chapter 24 of *Moby-Dick*, where he makes his case that the public should recognize the valor of the whaler and the importance of whaling. Whaling, Ishmael argues, is an imperial business that has changed the face of the world, leading to an age of exploration, if not a global economy.

He really heats up when he defends the whalemen's character, declaring that whalemen have "better than royal blood," and that if whalemen are butchers, so are the mightiest generals.

Do you notice a trend as Ishmael systematically compares whalemen and the whaling trade to noble subjects? His argument against the idea that "the whale has no famous author" makes the point clear. He is also defending the novel *Moby-Dick* itself, suggesting that it is a respectable epic on a praiseworthy theme, and perhaps anticipating the poor reviews that the book received, particularly in England where it was first published.

Officers and harpooners

Everything about one's life aboard a whaleship was strictly regimented according to rank. The difference in quality of life between the officers of a ship and the crew was dramatic. Officers enjoyed much more comfortable living conditions and better food in larger portions than did the crew. They were also empowered to beat the crew for misbehavior of any kind.

Needless to say, the personalities of the officers could affect every detail of the crews' lives. This is why Ishmael devotes such attention to the characters Starbuck, Stubb and Flask, the officers of the *Pequod*. There is Starbuck, who is "unduly conscientious for a seaman"; watch for how his cautious nature

becomes more and more important as the action of *Moby-Dick* proceeds. Stubb has a sense of humor under the worst of circumstances; this too becomes important as the action of the novel becomes more and more frenzied. Then there is Flask, whose fearlessness earns him the nickname King Post, after a piece of wood that can withstand many pressures.

Each of the three officers is in charge of his own whaleboat, and every whaleboat is assigned one harpooner. You've already met the harpooner Queequeg. Two other outsiders, the Native American Tashtego and the African Daggoo, join Queequeg in his calling. The ethnic identity of the harpooners leads Ishmael, yet again, to a critique of American society. He suggests that in whaling, as in other American enterprises, Native Americans and foreigners supply most of the brains and muscles. Regardless of their ethnicity, harpooners were extremely respected among other whalers.

Although the whaleship's crew is engaged in a collective quest that requires them to work together as a team, they are also partially divided by inequality and prejudice. For Ishmael, even when the *Pequod* is miles from home, it represents both the problems and the promise of the United States.

Did the titles of Chapters 26 and 27 catch your eye? This is just another example of Melville's effort to elevate the reputation of whaling. Note how, at the end of Chapter 26, he democratically insists on his noble depictions of "meanest mariners, and renegades and castaways."

Ahab

Of course, all of Ishmael's initial descriptions leave out the person you're wondering about most: Ahab, the one-legged captain of the *Pequod*. The delayed appearance of Ahab, both on the ship and in the novel, is bound to increase your curiosity about this strange captain as much as it does that of the *Pequod*'s whalers.

Did your first glimpse of Ahab live up to your expectations? Even after you meet him, the captain of the *Pequod* remains a mystery both to you and to the men of his ship. For example, Ishmael emphasizes that Ahab has a scar along the length of his face that resembles the brand of lightning on a "great tree." Has Ahab been touched by Fate, or, as Tashtego suggests, by "an elemental strife at sea"?

Standing alone on deck, Ahab is an unmovable figure with an ocean of turbulence inside him. Ishmael emphasizes Ahab's determination, his "unsunderable willfulness," but at the same time hints that there is much more beneath his captain's stony facade; to Ishmael, there seems to be "a crucifixion in his face."

Ahab is full of a mighty woe that takes away his pleasure in simple things. Gentle breezes give him only the shadow of a smile, and his pipe, meant for serenity, gets tossed overboard. Ahab is clearly preoccupied with something more than the everyday business of whaling. As the action of *Moby-Dick* continues, watch for how he grows increasingly larger than life.

As captain of the *Pequod*, Ahab should be solid and reliable. Ahab is an immovable leader, not through firm level-headedness, but rather because he is trapped by his own internal conflicts.

Did you notice how Ahab makes Stubb bend to his will after he insults him? Even later, in a vivid dream in which Ahab kicks him, Stubb cannot resist his captain's power. The dynamics among the ship's crew are full of this kind of tension. Whereas Ishmael strives to see his fellow whalemens in democratic terms, Ahab's rule over the Pequod will become more and more tyrannical.

The men of the *Pequod*—Ahab, the officers, harpooners and whalemens—together create a microcosm of society. As with any society, there are rules and rituals which must be observed. As you move forward, observe how the social structure and class system of the whaleship is reflected during meals.

Rituals of passage: The cabin-table and the masthead

It is perhaps understandable, and even necessary, that there be a hierarchy aboard a sailing vessel to maintain order and discipline. The class system aboard a whaling vessel was evident in every aspect of the day-to-day lives of the crew. For example, officers, mates and harpooners were quartered in the back of the ship while the crew slept in the rougher, front area of the whaling vessel. As you read, did you notice that although harpooners were not officers, they were generally treated better and afforded more privileges than average crew members out of respect for their skills? You'll continue to see this differentiation between the onboard classes, especially during meals.

The cabin-table

Food and authority were linked on whaleships and meals were strictly regulated. A whaleman's position on the ship determined not only *what* he ate, but also *how* he ate it. Non-officers frequently received less food than officers and in much less comfortable circumstances than officers. Harpooners were often given the privilege of eating at the captain's table but only after the captain and the officers had finished. This is another example of the respect extended to harpooners over average crew members in the onboard whaling society.

Were you amused by Ishmael's description of poor Flask's predicament? As the lowest ranking officer, he must start his meals last and end them first. Of course, the order that prevails when the officers take their meals starkly contrasts with the boisterous atmosphere when the harpooners eat. Their abuse of the poor cook is certainly in keeping with their roles as renegade harpooners. Ishmael's hilarious descriptions have a serious purpose, however. As his observant eyes take in all the details of shipboard society, Ishmael pokes fun at and undermines the shallow rituals that make up much of civilized life.

The perilous masthead

One of the more perilous jobs aboard a whaling vessel had to be keeping watch from the masthead. The **masthead** is the highest point of the vessel and obviously the best place to watch for sperm whale or other ships while at sea. Most of you are familiar with a protected crow's nest on the masthead. However, on a whaling vessel like the *Pequod*, this lookout point was not protected—it was little more than a perch with bars to hold on to. You can imagine how dangerous an endeavor standing watch was for the crew member unlucky enough to have masthead duty.

Visualize for a moment that you are at the top of the masthead for hours at a time, clinging to nothing more than the masthead itself and a few bars that serve as a perch, as the ship sways in sometimes very rough seas. Not your idea of fun? Can you imagine the trepidation of the new crew members as they took their turn on watch on the masthead for the first time?

Always eager to ennoble the whaler's trade, Ishmael constructs an illustrious lineage for the masthead, suggesting that it goes back to the pyramids of the ancient Egyptians. He also stresses how a seaman's duty on the masthead gives him time to reflect on philosophy or poetry, if he is so inclined.

As he paints a humorous picture of a young, melancholic seaman, Ishmael once again interweaves the minute details of the whaling trade with more general observations about human nature. You are caught by mixed feelings about the poet on the masthead: is this person a hopeless dreamer, or is he a little like you, searching for meaning beyond the mundane details of your daily lives?

Whaling was a dangerous undertaking for all, especially the crew. It's easy to see how the crew members could become dependent on each other because they often held each other's lives in their hands. If the officers were good men, the onboard class system could work very well. As you'll see going forward, the antithesis is also true and the system could be abused by a leader bent on furthering his purpose.

Going up on the masthead was something to which any whaler would have soon grown accustomed. Ishmael writes that, "on a long three or four years' voyage, as often happens, the sum of the various hours you spend at the masthead would amount to several entire months."

Ahab's monomaniacal purpose

Other than Ishmael, who signed aboard the *Pequod* in part as an alternative to suicide, the crew members of the whaling vessel were there to make money. They were gambling two to three years of their lives on a bet that they would have a successful hunt for sperm whale. If the hunt was not successful, their time and efforts would be wasted. As you move forward, you'll learn that Ahab also has an agenda of his own for this voyage which has nothing to do with making money.

Monomaniacal purpose revealed

Ahab finally breaks the day-to-day routine of the *Pequod* when he reveals to the whalers his real purpose in undertaking the venture. Did you anticipate his quest for revenge?

Ahab's description of the white whale that "dismasted" him of his leg strikes a recognizable chord for the *Pequod*'s harpooners. More experienced than the rest of the crew, they know the reputation of Moby Dick, and it's enough to make even these seasoned sailors a bit uneasy.

Starbuck, the first mate, is concerned about more than Moby Dick's immense size and power. He has two reasons for objecting to Ahab's plan. The first is that seeking out one particular whale won't bring the *Pequod* much money. Remember that if the voyage is not successful, the sailor's receive very little, if

any, compensation for their years of service on the voyage. Ahab is literally asking the sailor's to give up pay for him to have his revenge on Moby Dick.

The second is that it is blasphemous to be so fixated on killing a senseless animal. You'll remember that Ishmael underlined Starbuck's caution; here the first mate provides a sensible foil to Ahab's narrowly focused pursuit of revenge. Starbuck is like the conscience of the *Pequod*, always trying to return the captain and crew to the accepted rules of reason and morality.

Of course, Ahab is loath to listen to logic. As you read, notice how Ishmael frequently refers to Ahab and his plan as "monomaniac." This word perfectly describes a man who has become utterly attached to pursuing a single goal, regardless of the costs. Even as he inspires the crew to capture Moby Dick, Ahab has been trapped by his madness.

*Ahab is willing to go beyond the ends of the earth in searching for Moby Dick:
"Aye, aye! And I'll chase him round Good Hope, and round the Horn, and round
the Norway Maelstrom, and round perdition's flames before I give him up. And
this is what ye have shipped for, men! To chase that white whale on both sides of
land, and over all sides of earth, till he spouts black blood and rolls fin out."*

Grog and oaths

Did you notice how, right from the start, the men of the *Pequod* react to Ahab's plan as if they have been mesmerized? Even when he asks them about the simple details of whaling, such as how to respond to the sighting of a spout, they "find themselves marveling how it was that they themselves became so excited at such seemingly purposeless questions."

Ahab's pursuit of revenge takes hold of the crew's imagination, and they instantly agree to serve his purposes. Ahab's promise of a gold doubloon to the first person that sights Moby Dick helps to grease the wheels for their acceptance, but they are gripped by much more than money. After all, as Starbuck points out, Ahab's plan will more likely result in a loss of money than its gain. The whalemens are just transfixed by their captain's charisma, and their willingness to follow him defies all rational explanation.

The crew's commitment is sealed with grog and oaths, and the men of the *Pequod* are almost mystically joined together in their single-minded pursuit of Moby Dick. Still, they have differing perspectives on this new venture, and the chapters that follow "The Quarter-Deck" give you a chance to see their varied reactions.

First, you are taken inside the minds of Ahab, Starbuck and Stubb; then the narrator's eye moves farther back, and you see the drunken words of the whalemens as if they are characters in a play. From trepidation to glee, the different feelings of the men bring the emotional tension on board the *Pequod* to an almost fever pitch. As you hear the different voices of the crew through the shadows of time and space, you get the sense that they are departing on an almost supernatural journey into uncharted territory. Did you feel a sense of anticipation as well?

The crew of the *Pequod* have now changed the purpose of their original mission and embarked on a quest for an almost mythical creature, Moby Dick. In the next section, you'll learn more about the history, myth and legend that is Moby Dick.

Whale tales

Every fisherman has a fish tale. There is always a story to be shared about the one-that-got-away: a fish that is older, faster, stronger and certainly more cunning than other fish —perhaps, even more cunning than the fisherman. Based on the historical evidence of the great whale that sank the *Essex*, Moby Dick was the legend—the great fish story—for these whalers.

The legendary Moby Dick

Ishmael gives you two reasons for Moby Dick's incredible reputation: men of the sea have a tendency to exaggerate, and they particularly revere sperm whales. Taken together, these reasons explain why the white whale seems larger than life.

Does that mean that the whale Moby Dick is mostly myth? Not necessarily. Ishmael suggests that although some of its reputation might only be based on superstition, other aspects of it (such as the whale's apparent ability to be in multiple places at the same time) have a rational explanation.

You've probably already noticed that Ishmael is drawn to both scientific and mystic explanations for the meaning of life. It's as if he can only understand the world around him by familiarizing himself with all of its physical details as well as the larger supernatural forces that might be acting in it. Ishmael sees the world as complex and contradictory, and he doesn't want to be limited to one way of understanding as he strives to make sense of a wondrous whale whose nature cannot ever be fully understood.

Beyond Moby Dick's actual attributes, what's particularly important for the novel is how the whale lives in the imaginations of the characters—not just Ahab but all the men of the *Pequod*. Do you remember when, at the beginning of the novel, Ishmael suggests that the ocean is a mirror in which humanity sees itself reflected? This is true as well of Moby Dick; Ahab sees in the whale "not only all his bodily woes, but all his intellectual and spiritual exasperations." While for Ahab Moby Dick is "all evil . . . visibly personified," Ishmael sees the whiteness of the whale as a symbol of a number of "terrible" things, including death.

Notice how Ahab's determined quest for revenge is bound up with everything Moby Dick symbolizes for him. For Ahab, Moby Dick is a "pasteboard mask"; by "striking through the mask," he will break out of the prison of his life.

Moby Dick is like a blank slate, then, reflecting back the characters' fears and superstitions. Of course, the recurring question the novel asks is whether the whale itself has any evil intentions, or whether it is just a projection of the darkest elements of its hunters. Whether reality or just a reflection of the crew members' fears, Moby Dick seems to take on its own unique personification in the novel.

Mocha Dick

In developing the "character" of Moby Dick, Melville had to look no further than other seafaring tales. In 1839, an incredible tale appeared in the literary magazine *The Knickerbocker*. In this story, J. N. Reynolds retells how the first mate of the *Penguin* kills a great white whale—"Mocha Dick." His story purports to be a mostly true description of their bloody battle.

Like Moby Dick, Mocha Dick is a whale of immense size, with a reputation to match. The first mate describes the whale as a "renowned monster," "white as wool" and of "prodigious size and strength." More than that, the whale's personality made it a perfect model for the whale that haunts Ahab.

Mocha Dick is what you would call a "fighting whale," and it has the battle scars to prove it. Its back is "serried with irons," testifying to scores of unsuccessful attempts to subdue this defiant creature. Although the first mate of the *Penguin* does eventually kill Mocha Dick, the confrontation lasts two days. During this anxious time, Mocha Dick repeatedly shows his enormous strength and determination.

It's easy to see that the tale of the mighty Mocha Dick provided some essential details and themes for Melville's own Moby Dick. In fact, the authors of "Mocha Dick" and *Moby-Dick* share an important attitude: although they acknowledge that the reputation of the prodigious white whale may be exaggerated in some respects, they insist that it is in large part based on a true accounting of the whale's qualities of mind and body.

Mocha Dick would not have been the only great whale story with which Melville was familiar as he developed the whale Moby Dick in the novel. The *Essex* was also sunk by a whale of immense proportions which seemed to possess, at least in the minds of the crew, unusual cunning and intelligence.

Ishmael's affidavit

Ishmael tells you of Moby Dick's "unexampled, intelligent malignity;" in his "affidavit," he asserts that "the Sperm Whale is in some cases sufficiently powerful, knowing and judiciously malicious, as with direct aforethought to stave in, utterly destroy and sink a large ship." In support of this bold assertion about the cunning destructiveness of the whale, Ishmael adduces the wreck of the *Essex*.

Have you been curious enough to read Owen Chase or Thomas Nickerson's first-hand accounts of the whale attack on the Essex? If so, then you saw that Chase also regarded the whale as a personal adversary, attributing human qualities such as anger, rage, fury, resentment and revenge to the whale. Like Ahab and Ishmael, Chase felt that the whale was cunning and premeditated in its attacks, deliberately ramming the vessel at its weakest point to inflict the most damage.

Despite their size, whaleships were relatively small and somewhat fragile by today's standards. After the sinking of the *Essex* and the publication of the story of Mocha Dick, it's easy to see how crew members of whaling vessels would not only share their personal whaling stories but seek out stories from other sailors about their prey. These exchanges often took place at gams.

Gams and isolation

Although whaleships were their own microcosm of society, they were also frequently alone and isolated from others. One of the whaleman's greatest difficulties was this isolation. In this age of instant communication, it's almost impossible for most to imagine going months without hearing about world events or the news from your own families.

Under normal circumstances, whalers had a number of customs to get around their intense isolation. For example, they had a labyrinthine system of mail delivery in which outgoing whaleships would carry letters from home to inbound ships. Of course, these letters had only a slight chance of reaching their recipients. Delivery depended entirely on a chance meeting between "sender" and "receiver" on the wide-open sea. Whalers often used makeshift mailboxes on various islands as well.

Without modern communications, whaling vessels and their crew, like those depicted on the *Pequod*, created their own universe. They were allowed to interact with the ships they met in the course of their voyage. These meetings allow the men to participate in the nautical ritual of the **gam**, in which whalers visit each other's ships to exchange letters, whaling news, newspapers and, of course, sea yarns. It was here at the gams where crew members would share their whale stories and actively seek stories from others.

These mid-ocean encounters could provide a much-needed break from the monotony and isolation of shipboard life. Notice, though, how Ahab makes all of the gams conform to his monomaniac purpose: he's not really interested in socializing with a ship that can't help him find Moby Dick. Further, the ships that the *Pequod* encounters often give you another perspective on the issues confronting Ahab's men; these ships, too, are concerned about issues of leadership and watchful for mysterious omens.

It is at one of these gams that you first hear of the *Town-Ho's* story.

The *Town-Ho's* story

Gams were a normal part of the whaling life. Melville learned about the wreck of the *Essex* from Owen Chase's son during a gam, and J. N. Reynolds, author of "Mocha Dick," heard about the fearsome white whale during a shipboard gam. In your own time, Tim Severin chased down the famous white whale by talking to the fishermen of Lamalera.

Do you get a sense of how the realities and myths of sea life are handed down and filtered through human understanding? This, of course, doesn't make them any less true, even if certain details may get exaggerated in the retelling. Like *Moby-Dick* itself, the well-told yarn provides a way of encapsulating your partial understanding of the sea and the life that depends on it; it also may express your fascination with a world that ultimately is beyond your view.

As you've already observed, Ahab stopped for gams only when it suited his purpose and furthered his hunt of Moby Dick. One of these gams took place aboard the *Town-Ho*, where Ishmael, an incurable teller of tales, first heard the story of their encounter with the great whale. From its very beginning, with the "Extracts," *Moby-Dick* is full of stories and rumors that show the many dimensions of both the

legendary whale and human life. The *Town-Ho's* story, framed as a tale that Ishmael retells years later at the Golden Inn, is no exception.

The tale of Steelkilt and Radney's enmity is overlaid with prophetic tones; Ishmael tells his listeners from the start that "Radney was doomed and made mad." Just as you wait in suspense to know how the journey of the *Pequod* will turn out, you await the resolution of the *Town-Ho's* story with increasing anticipation. Disorder, rebellion, violence—these catch your attention because they are possibilities close to the surface on any whaleship. You find yourself still more gripped when the action of the tale is stunningly concluded by Moby Dick himself.

In Ishmael's view, the *Town-Ho's* story, like that of the *Pequod*, is bound up with the will of the fates. For him, as for many of his fellow whalers, Moby Dick's killing of Radney provides a providential end to what started out as a dramatic human encounter. This yarn helps you to see what is at stake in the *Pequod's* quest for revenge, making you wonder what will happen when it, too, goes head to head with the mighty whale, pitting human power against a strength that is almost beyond this world.

Moving forward

In this lesson, you learned about the class system observed onboard whaling vessels and the differences in treatment between officers, crew members and the special respect afforded harpooners. You also watched as Ahab revealed his true purpose of revenge for the voyage and you begin to see Moby Dick, the great whale itself, unveiled. In Lesson 3, you'll explore the hunting techniques that the whalers used to conquer these mighty creatures. At the same time, you'll dive into the philosophical implications of these feeble human attempts to conquer the sea. Before moving on, don't forget to complete the assignments and take the quiz.

Lesson 2, Assignment 1: Getting underway: life aboard the *Pequod*

Assignment instructions:

Based on the chapters you read for Lesson 2, and the topics covered in the lesson, address the following questions:

- In what ways do the crew of the *Pequod* give the whale human qualities? What is the significance of this personification to their interpretation of the whale? What do you think Moby Dick symbolizes?
- What did you think when Ahab revealed his true purpose for the voyage? Was his quest for revenge fair to the men who signed on to voyage and who would not be paid if the voyage was unsuccessful? What did you think of their reactions to his request? Why were they willing to follow him even though it might mean less money for them?
- Did you notice that none of the harpooners were Americans? What do you think about Ishmael's assertions that Native Americans and foreigners supply most of the brains and muscles in American enterprises?
- How do you think Ishmael would have responded today to the globalization of the workforce that is observed in many industries? Are there any parallels or differences? If so, what are they?

Lesson 2, Assignment 2: Preparing for Lesson 3

Assignment instructions:

To prepare for Lesson 3, read Chapters 55-92 of *Moby Dick: or, the Whale* (Penguin Classics). As you read, keep the following questions and concepts in mind:

- What did you think about Ishmael's representation that the whale's condition, as a hunted animal, mirrors the human condition?
- What do you think about the crew's preoccupation with signs and symbols? How do the signs impact them? Do they find comfort in the signs or do they cause fear? How do you think their belief in the signs will affect them when they finally face Moby Dick?

Lesson 3: In search of the whale

In this lesson, you'll learn about the hunting techniques used to catch and kill one of the largest creatures in the sea. You'll also learn about exploitation of the sea, the whaler's culture and what it teaches us about ourselves.

The hunt

In Lesson 2, you learned about nineteenth-century whaling and life on a whale vessel, and the inherent dangers. You also observed the reactions of the crew of *Moby-Dick* as Ahab revealed his true purpose and desire for revenge against the great whale.

In this lesson, Ishmael will guide you through the perilous and demanding hunting techniques used by whale hunters to catch and kill one of the largest creatures in the world. You'll also learn more about the superstitions of the seamen and their constant search for signs and omens and their meanings.

Whale hunting

Hunting and killing a whale was an exhilarating and dangerous experience. Melville takes you right into the whaleboats, side-by-side with the whalers in the midst of the chase.

For the men of the *Pequod*, like all whalers, killing a whale was a two-step process. First, they would hurl a harpoon at the whale. The harpoon was basically a spear on a line that was attached to the whaleboat. (On a sailing vessel, a "rope" is referred to as a "line.") The line itself was a mere two-thirds of an inch thick. That does not seem like much in comparison to the size of the whale! The point of the harpooning was to attach the whale to the boat. If the harpoon struck the whale, the whaleboat would then be dragged on a thrilling "Nantucket sleigh ride" as the whale pulled the boat along after it. If a whale **sounds** (a deep underwater dive), the line could be attached to another boat's line so as to remain attached to the whale. Finally, when the whale had worn itself out, the men could come close enough to hurl their lances and complete the kill.



Illustration of a Nantucket sleigh ride.

Working with the lines was extremely dangerous. There was no room for error—the smallest mistake could result in a loss of limb or life. The violent pulling of the whale-line by the whale also constantly threatened injury to the boat's crew. Pay close attention as you read the description of the lines as it foreshadows a key event later in the novel.

Remember that whaleboats were small, wooden boats—little more than rowboats launched from the main sailing vessel. They did not have motors. Crew members did not have lifejackets or a global positioning system (GPS) locator if they fell overboard. The larger whaling vessel could not easily stop, or turn around to pick up a survivor if he became separated from his whaleboat. Whaling was not only financially risky, but also risky from the viewpoint of personal safety as well. Whalemen took their lives in their hands each time they entered the hunt.

Despite its dangers, or rather because of them, whale hunting was an invigorating experience. In the face of imminent danger, protected only by the quality of their intelligence and courage, the men of the *Pequod* become most alive when the hunt begins. Stubb cajoles his crew with a mixture of "fun and fury" as he pushes them onward in the chase. Whale hunting required the utmost of its practitioners, and like other tests of a sailor's mettle, it often brought out the best and worst in each hunter who engaged in this deadly, winner-take-all contest. It was the ultimate test of skill, courage and character.

Hunter becomes the hunted

Things did not always go smoothly during a whale hunt. Whales frequently shattered the attacking whaleboats with one swipe of their tails. If you read Owen Chase's account of the sinking of the *Essex*, you discovered that this is exactly what happened to his vessel just before the attack on the *Essex* itself.

For the men of the *Essex*, the ultimate test was not the conquest of the whale but the scavenging of both practical and psychological resources to get them through the trials that followed the sinking of their ship. The whaleboats that were their only home were designed to coast over the waves in high-speed chases, and were ill suited to long-term use. The whalemen would have to adapt the boats to make the journey, even as they prepared their own spirits.

It's hard to imagine how dangerously disoriented the men of the *Essex* became all too quickly after an attack by their own, all-too-real Moby Dick. Their ship—their island of security on a vast ocean—was literally turned upside-down in an attack that was beyond their comprehension and without precedent. Although they had salvaged navigation instruments and books from the *Essex*, they didn't know where they were or where they should go. If they traveled westward to the Marquesas Islands, just about 1,200 miles away on the windward side, cannibals would eat them, or so they mistakenly believed. If they traveled more than 3,000 miles upwind towards the coast of South America, they might very well die of starvation or lose their way. In either case, they would have to withstand menacing sea creatures as they made their journey.

As Nathaniel Philbrick writes, "Without their ship to protect them, the hunters had become the prey." But for a twist of luck or skill, the *Pequod* could suffer the same fate.

"The Whale is harpooned to be sure; but bethink you, how you would manage a powerful unbroken colt, with the mere appliance of a rope tied to the root of his tail." —A Chapter on Whaling in Ribs and Trucks, from the "Extracts."

Anatomy of a whale

To better understand the hunt itself, it is helpful to understand more about whales and whaling in general. It's obvious that Ishmael thinks that the whale is a creature to be revered. He takes great pride in reminding you that whales have made their appearance throughout history. He places whalers in the category with such noteworthy characters as Hercules, Jonah and Vishnu (Hindu god), all of whom were associated with whales, as well.

As Ishmael analyzes every last one of the whale's features, he struggles to reconcile the advances of natural science with his romantic conception of the sea and its creatures. For example, earlier in the novel (Chapter 32, "Cetology," or the study of whales), he provides a long breakdown of the different species of whales and their attributes. But when Ishmael ends his analysis, he insists that it is incomplete; like the novel itself, he says, it is just "the draft of a draft." It makes sense that Ishmael's depiction of the *Pequod's* journey into the unknown can only be seen as through shadows; just as he can never understand the whale completely, he can never show this journey in its full light.

As you noticed, Ishmael interlaces the tale of Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick with long discussions of the minutiae of every aspect of whales and whaling. Ishmael's forays into such topics as whale biology aren't really interruptions of the story, however. Moby-Dick has a wide compass, and Ishmael is just fleshing out some of the legend's most important themes.

It's virtually impossible to paint a whale accurately, Ishmael tells you in Chapter 55, yet that is exactly what he is trying to do as he gives you the whale from all its angles, both inside and out. Looking over Ishmael's shoulder, you see the sperm whale's head with its great store of valuable spermaceti; you see its "blanket" of blubber. Yet the whale can never be just a commodity or an object of scientific investigation. Ishmael's observations leave you feeling much like Ahab in Chapter 70, imploring the head of the whale to reveal its secrets. Despite all of Ishmael's science, you can never fully know this mystifying creature.

To Ishmael, the whale is not just another creature—it is a creature of immense power, majesty and mystery. As you'll see next, Ishmael finds it representative of the full human condition and worthy of further philosophical musings regarding the meaning of the whale and life.

Observations

Ever the story teller and philosopher, Ishmael finds much to fascinate him in the whale. Ishmael believes that the whale is just as impossible to know and fully understand the whale as it is to understand the human state and meaning of existence.

Philosophical observations

For Ishmael, the sperm whale represents everything unknowable about the ocean. One of the reasons that Ishmael feels he can never fully comprehend the sea is that, for him, the waters covering the earth are much like humanity's mysterious and deceptive dark side. In the ocean, Ishmael asserts, nothing is what it seems to be: creatures hide in the deep water, or violent, "remorseless" animals such as sharks

show off a beautiful facade. The relationship between the "green, gentle . . . earth" and the treacherous ocean provides Ishmael with an analogy for the human soul itself.

The hunted whale's predicament also mirrors the human condition. As Ishmael describes, the whale-line that traps this mighty beast can also entangle its hunters—literally and figuratively. The whale-line is therefore Ishmael's metaphor for the "ever-present perils of life." In your narrator's pessimistic view, "all men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks." For example, think about how Ahab is so fervently attached to his quest for revenge. Does he control his mad desire for vengeance, or does it control him?

Ishmael's descriptions of nature's complexity lead him to observations about the greatest mystery of all: humanity. Ahab echoes his thoughts, exclaiming at one point, "O Nature, and O soul of man! How far beyond all utterance are your linked analogies! Not the smallest atom stirs or lives in matter, but has its cunning duplicate in mind."

Ishmael tells his readers two contradictory things. On the one hand, he says that you will be safer if you try to stay away from the "horrors of the half known life" by remaining on an inner island of "peace and joy." To take one of his examples, you'll be better off if you don't get so curious about whales that you have to see one for yourself, because you'll run the risk of getting killed by it.

On the other hand, Ishmael says that you can't avoid the "perils of life" that confront you no matter where you are. If you have a philosophical attitude, Ishmael claims, you'll feel as safe in a whaleboat as you would feel "seated before your evening fire with a poker, and not a harpoon, by your side." This stoic attitude is belied, however, by the passion with which Ishmael experiences the vicissitudes of the *Pequod's* mission.

Surrounded by water, what the men of the Pequod confronted most of all was themselves. Even as their stories depict extraordinary human endeavors, they also show you some of humanity's most basic aspects, such as your ability to confront fear, deprivation and your own dark sides.

As you've also observed, the sea is a place of isolation and loneliness. It's a place where you become dependent on self, others and the Fates. In this environment of vast isolation, it's easy to see how you might begin to look for signs, omens and meanings in even the smallest details of everyday life. It's also easy to observe how sanity might begin to slip into the clarity brought only by madness.

Portents and prophecies

Alone on the vast ocean, with danger all around, whalemens could become extremely superstitious, looking to the sea for signs of their ultimate fate. Owen Chase tells you that the men of the shipwrecked *Essex* placed their faith in the forces of Providence to get them through their ordeal. Providence was to thank for keeping their boats together during a storm. And yes, for these wanderers on the sea, their

voyage that began under a bad sign that continued to keep them at the mercy of the elements and the forces of destiny and the Fates.

Imagining his revenge against Moby Dick, Ahab raves to himself, "The prophecy was that I should be dismembered; and—Aye! I lost this leg. I now prophesy that I will dismember my dismemberer. Now, then, be the prophet and the fulfiller one." For Ahab, prophecy is one way that he attempts to mold the future to his will—to his monomaniacal purpose.

The men of the *Pequod* are preoccupied by the ocean's portents. For example, they become fearful when a great squid is sighted, because this is sign of trouble to come. For this crew obsessed with symbols, questions about the meaning of their vengeful mission keep on multiplying. To take another example, the discovery of Ahab's castaway whaleboat crew helps make sense of the shadowy figures seen entering the *Pequod* before it began its voyage. But the crew leader, Fedallah, is himself a new source of mystery. He may not be the devil Stubb thinks he is, but watch for how his cryptic words foretell the events to come.

Fedallah is not the only character who predicts the future of the *Pequod* and its men. There is also Gabriel, who gives Ahab a message that seems to come from another world. His prophecy of Ahab's death casts yet another shadow over the *Pequod's* plan, making you wonder yet again if the ship and its crew aren't caught in a fateful vortex from which the only escape is death.

Even the name of Gabriel's ship—the *Jeroboam*—brings a heightened sense of impending doom and disaster to the men of the *Pequod*. If you'll recall from Chapters 1 through 18, the owners of the *Pequod* had a desire that all crew members be Christian. As such, the men would have been familiar with the biblical character of Jeroboam, who was delivered a warning from a prophet that he failed to heed. As a result of his stubbornness and single-mindedness, he suffered terribly.

Also note the reactions on the *Pequod* as they learn of the death of Harry Macey, one of the seamen of the *Jeroboam*, as they try to capture Moby Dick, and the subsequent plague, which Gabriel claims to have caused (and of course, claims that he alone possesses the cure as well). Although Gabriel is clearly quite mad, the crew of the *Pequod*, in their search for signs and omens, is surely absorbing these words and actions.

The signs are in place. The prophecies have been given. It must surely seem to the men of the *Pequod* that the Fates are aligning against them in their search for Moby Dick.

Sticking together, moving apart

As you've already observed, except for the occasional gam with another ship passing by, the crew of whaling vessels lived in relative isolation. They became their own community—their own society on the seas. Ishmael has already shared his views about whales and how they relate to the human condition. Observe as Ishmael has a unique encounter with the whales themselves and their community. As you investigate the roles of community and property in *Moby-Dick*, consider what the human exploitation of

sea life teaches you about yourself. What can the whalemen's culture tell you about human society on land, as well?

Sticking together

Moby-Dick analyzes human society against the backdrop of the ocean's life. In this book, shoals of whales mirror groups of men; both must stick together to survive.

Ishmael and his hunting partners have a dramatic and yet strangely peaceful encounter with whales in the midst of a day of hunting; their whaleboat is dragged to the center of a huge shoal of whales. Looking at the whales up close, Ishmael can't help noticing how human they seem. He sees mothers and newborn whales, and remarks that the young whales have the same look about them as human infants.



A group of sperm whales swimming together.

Ishmael moves from his own personal experience among the whales to a scientific account of their behavior. In Chapter 88, "Schools and Schoolmasters," he describes the two different kinds of whale shoals: those formed primarily of females, and those made up of young bulls. Older males might move in and out of groups, but they tend to stay on their own.

It's easy to see how Ishmael might draw a parallel between the behavior of whales and humans, particularly that of nineteenth-century Nantucket society. In both "societies" (whale and human), females tended the home fires and the young while the men roamed the earth.

Moving apart

Ishmael and Philbrick's characterization of male sperm whales help you appreciate more fully the drama of the confrontation between Ahab and Moby Dick. Although Ahab has convinced the entire crew of the *Pequod* to join him in his quest for revenge, in a real way he's going it alone. In the conflict between Ahab and Moby Dick that is to come, you can expect to see a clash of individual wills between two tough-minded loners.

Although the men of the *Essex* worked together to survive another day on the open ocean in 25-foot whaleboats, each of them also waged a private battle against want and desperation. These men were

caught between two conflicting impulses: what Chase called a "desperate instinct" to stay together, and the rational knowledge that they might be better off fending for themselves. For Owen Chase and his fellow crew members, self-preservation depended on knowing when to stick together, and when to move apart.

As you read, see if you can determine if the men of the *Pequod* will ultimately stick together or will they move apart when the final conflict comes.

Ishmael suggests that young bulls are "like a mob of young collegians," and that "no prudent underwriter would insure them any more than he would a riotous young lad at Yale or Harvard." What do you think of this humorous comparison? What is the effect of Ishmael's repeatedly making these hunted whales seem more human?

Property rights on the sea

In many ways, life on the sea is no different than life on land. You'll see that just as you have rules for property ownership on land, the same exists on the sea. In many ways, the rules observed at sea were perhaps considered by some to be much fairer than those observed by society.

The whaling code and property rights

As Ishmael describes, whalemens adhered to strict rules whenever there was a dispute between whaleships over the possession of a whale. Their "universal undisputed law" established that (1) whoever had control over a fish was entitled to it, and (2) a fish not in anyone's immediate control was up for grabs. Their strict code of fairness was observed not only in the hunt itself but in day-to-day life as well.

There was an important exception to the whalemens code of "fast" and "loose" fish, and it gives Ishmael the opportunity to critique what he considers an outrageous abuse of royal power. In England, whales captured along the coast were considered the property of the King and Queen regardless of who had caught them. This leads Ishmael to question whether royal power can have any legitimate source at all. Always the outsider, he is unwilling to accept blindly the world as it is, especially when the rights of the common people are at stake.

"Loose-fish and fast-fish"

When Melville was writing *Moby-Dick* in 1850 and 1851, he saw many examples of injustice in the world around him. Slavery still existed in the Southern states, and many countries were becoming empires through colonization.

Though the whalemens code was meant to exemplify fairness, Ishmael uses the rules governing ownership of "fast" and "loose" fish as a metaphor for the rampant injustice he sees in the world. In his view, even as the whalemens create rules that strive for fairness, there are larger forces acting in the world that make humanity itself much like a whale ready for the taking. People such as "Russian serfs

and Republican slaves," and "broken-backed laborers," Ishmael asserts, are like fast whales: they have no ability to control their own lives.

Although it might seem obvious that slaves by definition were not free to govern their lives, Ishmael's argument has wider implications. He goes on to suggest that the rest of the world's people could be hooked at any moment: "What are the Rights of Man and the Liberties of the World but Loose-Fish?" In Ishmael's pessimistic view, no one is immune to the threat of injustice. He concludes his agitated argument by drawing you in as well: "And what are you, reader, but a Loose-Fish and a Fast-Fish, too?"

Ishmael's argument about loose and fast fish is just one example of how *Moby-Dick* moves from discussing something very specific to outlining a much more general human theme. In giving you all of the details of the whaling trade, Ishmael also shows you a blueprint of human nature.

Moving forward

In this lesson, you observed the intricacies of the hunt and how whalers could subdue the mighty creatures of the deep, as well as how the trying techniques of whale hunting could become a metaphor for the dangers of the human condition itself. In Lesson 4, you'll continue your investigation of the darker side of the whaling trade, following the men of the *Pequod* as they journey into the rarely traveled waters of extreme desperation and madness as prophecies are fulfilled. Before moving on, don't forget to complete the assignments and take the quiz.

Lesson 3, Assignment 1: Searching for whales

Assignment instructions:

Based on the chapters you read for Lesson 3, and the topics covered in the lesson, address the following questions:

- What are your thoughts on Ishmael's biting commentary on the nature of property? How is whaling life a microcosm of the larger human society?
- What did you think about Ishmael's assertion that "all men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks." (Remember that Ishmael used whale-lines as a metaphor for the perils that you may face in life.) Do you agree or disagree with Ishmael? Why or why not? What were the halters that were around Ahab's neck? Do you have any halters in your life?
- What is your reaction to Ishmael's various efforts to interpret the sperm whale's physiognomy? What do these failed attempts say about the readability of *Moby-Dick*? You might want to think about the following quote in formulating your response: "I but put that brow before you. Read it if you can" (Chapter 79).

Lesson 3, Assignment 2: Preparing for Lesson 4

Assignment instructions:

To prepare for Lesson 4, read Chapters 93 through the Epilogue of *Moby-Dick: or, the Whale* (Penguin Classics).

In this final lesson, you'll witness the climatic final battle with Moby-Dick and the end of the *Pequod*. As you read, keep the following questions and concepts in mind:

- What did you think about the treatment Pip received? Was his treatment racially motivated or were there other reasons at play? How did you feel about the treatment of African-American whalers in general as compared to their counterparts?
- What did you think when Ahab was the one who spotted Moby Dick and he received his own doubloon? With the preoccupation that the seamen had with signs and symbols, what message do you think that this sent to the crew?
- How do you interpret the significance of the standoff between Starbuck and Ahab? How does it enrich your understanding of the novel's meaning? Keep in mind the following quote from Ahab as you formulate your answer: "Ahab never thinks; he only feels, feels, feels; *that's* tingling enough for mortal man! to think's audacity" (Chapter 135).
- How did you feel about the ending of this book? Do you see the end of *Moby-Dick* as the completion of an event that has been foreordained, as Ishmael suggests at the beginning of the novel, or does it rather say something about human nature? If so, what?

Lesson 4: Anticipation and the final conflict

Tension rises as the crew nears their encounter with Moby Dick. This lesson covers the final chase after the white whale brings the drama of this sea adventure to a close, even as it raises further questions about the meaning of the novel.

Man overboard, twice

Welcome back. You've almost completed your journey into the world of whales and whaling—the world of *Moby-Dick*. In this final lesson, more of *Moby-Dick*'s symbols will be examined as final prophecies and omens appear. As the conclusion of the novel draws near, you'll observe how the characters, still under Ahab's spell, seemingly lose their own will and instead succumb to the will of the Fates. And, of course, you'll step into the battle!

Pip

Pip is a small African-American ship-keeper who Ishmael describes using highly prejudicial language, suggesting that because Pip is black he naturally has a certain "jolly brightness." The difficulties of the *Pequod*'s journey cause "tender-hearted" Pip to lose his love for life, however, and to become a gloomy, mad prophet.

Ishmael's narrative raises the possibility that Pip's fate is due, at least in part, to the treatment he receives because of his race. Unaccustomed to the violence and danger of hunting whales that could reach 70 tons, Pip gets frightened and jumps overboard the first time he joins Stubb and his crew in their attack on a bull. Stubb angrily tells Pip that he won't pick him up the next time, reminding him "a whale would sell for thirty times what you would, Pip, in Alabama." As Ishmael notes, the whalers are out to make money. In this instance, Stubb seems to regard even his fellow crew member as nothing more than a commodity.

Pip is up against forces far more oppressive than the second mate's racism, however. Although Stubb wouldn't ultimately sacrifice Pip, the next time Pip jumps overboard Stubb leaves him in the water for a time. Here Pip must face possible abandonment in the void of the ocean, and this threat changes him forever although he is eventually rescued. Earlier Stubb had half-jokingly denied Pip's personhood, but when Pip emerges from the water he has left his old self behind completely. For the rest of the novel, this frightened ship-keeper will speak of "Pip" as someone who is "missing."

Pip undergoes an incredible change when he is abandoned—he loses himself but gains the insight of madness. He has been "carried down alive to wondrous depths, where strange shapes of the unwarped primal world glided to and fro before his passive eyes; and the misermernan, Wisdom, revealed his hoarded heaps."

As he descends into insanity, Pip becomes another voice of prophecy on the *Pequod*, speaking the truth about the ship's fate almost in spite of himself. You'll watch as he becomes another part of the mosaic of symbols and omens on the *Pequod*.

Coins and symbols

For Ishmael, the world is full of symbolism; although he is fascinated by scientific investigations into the physical nature of the universe, he insists that there is much more to reality than that. For example, you can look at Ishmael's assertion that "some certain significance lurks in all things, else all things are little worth, and the round world itself but an empty cipher, except to sell by the cartload." The symbolic meanings that he sees in the world around him give Ishmael a way to resist the empty buying and selling of goods and human souls; his world-view is more textured and complex.

The wooden captain and his living vessel

You've explored the mesmerizing effect that Ahab has on the crew of the *Pequod*. His mad quest for revenge overtakes all of them, with the possible exception of Starbuck. Ahab also has a profound connection to the *Pequod* itself. Ishmael describes how "the rushing *Pequod*, freighted with savages, and laden with fire, and burning a corpse, and plunging into that blackness of darkness, seemed the material counterpart of her monomaniac commander's soul."

Like the *Pequod* itself, Ahab is preoccupied with death, and more and more separated from the forces of civilization as he heads for parts unknown. Further, Ishmael's comparison shows that he sees the butchering of whales on the *Pequod* not as a path to wealth, but as a symbolic illustration of the blood and violence behind Ahab's desperate quest for revenge.

The doubloon

Nailed to the masthead, where all can readily see, is the doubloon that Ahab promised to the first person to spot Moby Dick. It's a constant reminder to everyone on the ship of the final battle that is certain to come. The coin is not important because of its monetary value. Its true value is in just being "the white whale's talisman."

A symbol of the *Pequod*'s mission of revenge, the doubloon has various meanings for the whalemens. In one dramatic scene, you are led into their minds as a number of them pass by it and give their interpretations. Ahab looks at the coin and sees himself and the storms that all men must weather. For Starbuck, the coin has mixed messages: in it he sees both a "vale of Death" and "the sun of Righteousness," yet he is fearful that the darkness will overrun the sun's brightness. Stubb isn't much troubled by the coin, but he should be. What did you think when his astrological reading of the doubloon ends with "to wind up, with Pisces, or the Fishes, we sleep?"

For Pip, the doubloon is "the ship's navel." In the riddling language of prophecy, he predicts that its will be their undoing: "But, unscrew your navel, and what's the consequence?"

As one by one they pass by the doubloon, the men of the *Pequod* see nothing there to reassure themselves. Though varied, all of their interpretations are grim. They all view the symbol of their mission's success with foreboding, yet still they cling to it. Through the growing gloom on board the *Pequod*, you can see what should be symbols of triumph (the doubloon, the corpse of whale) turn into

figures of despair. It is as if the doubloon itself is a constant reminder of the final, desperate battle that is on the horizon.

As you move towards the climax of the novel, you'll see the unveiling of the final symbols and prophecies. In some ways, the crew begins to look forward to the conflict with Moby Dick with morbid acceptance and anticipation.

Anticipating the end

As the *Pequod* continues its journey, moving closer to its encounter with Moby Dick, the whalemens on board become increasingly caught up in their expectations of coming doom.

When Queequeg becomes ill with fever, he senses that his end is near and asks for a coffin. Though Queequeg rallies, the coffin remains on board, first as Queequeg's sea chest, then, ironically, as a life buoy. Carved with "grotesque figures and drawings" that resemble Queequeg's tattoos, the coffin is an ominous second incarnation of Ishmael's bosom friend.

Ahab, of course, looks forward to Moby Dick's demise, and he begins to prepare for this through superstitious ritual. While Queequeg keeps the carpenter busy building his coffin, Ahab engages the ship's blacksmith to forge a new harpoon for him. This harpoon is forged from steel taken from the nails of racing horse shoes. If you'll recall, despite the fact that the owners of the *Pequod* wanted all its crew to be Christian, the three harpooners are pagans. Ahab asks each of them for a "true death-temper" of their own blood for the tip of the harpoon. Each complies, and the weapon is tempered with the blood of the three harpooners in a diabolical baptism that underscores Ahab's inversion of traditional morals and values. Ahab baptizes the harpoon by covering the barb with the blood of his three pagan harpooners. His ritual baptism of the harpoon is completed as he speaks: "*Ego non baptizo te in nomine patris, sed in nomine diaboli!*" ("I do not baptize thee in the name of the father, but in the name of the devil.")

You remember that, at the beginning of the novel, Ishmael describes whaling as an alternative to suicide. As the Pequod's journey grows more and more ominous, he repeats this idea, suggesting that death, like the ocean itself, is "the region of the strange Untried." Even as the Pequod chases after death and vengeance, it is also on a strange voyage of wonder and discovery.

In the later part of the novel, the difference between whaling and suicide seems less clear. Ishmael argues that "to the death-longing eyes of such men, who still have left in them some interior compunctions against suicide, does the all-contributed and all-receptive ocean alluringly spread forth his whole plain of unimaginable, taking terrors, and wonderful, new-life adventures." Like Queequeg and Ahab, Ishmael has mixed feelings as he looks death in the eye—his bleak anticipation is combined with a fevered excitement. The "unknown" pulls Ishmael and the rest of the *Pequod*'s crew with an almost magnetic draw. Is it the Fates that have made their voyage inevitable? Or is it man's tenacity in clinging to desperate and destructive desires?

Omens: The stage is set

The crew is accelerating towards the inevitable, seemingly without a will of their own making. The final signs and prophecies are given, sealing the fate of the *Pequod* and its crew.

Reading the signs

Moby-Dick is sprinkled with omens and prophecies, increasing in frequency as the book progresses. Their accumulated effect leaves you, like the crew of the *Pequod*, dizzy and disoriented.

In a dramatic scene, the *Pequod* is beset by a typhoon, what Ishmael calls "the direst of all storms." Typhoons are not unusual in the Pacific, but this one sets the stage for some ghastly proceedings that are anything but normal. With lightning striking all around him, Ahab insists on following his plan through to the end. Against a backdrop of his crew lit up by the tempest-like "skeletons in Herculaneum," Ahab shouts defiantly at the stormy natural elements that seem to mirror his vengeful desires. Lightning strikes his harpoon, causing it to burn "like a serpent's tongue," and the storm inverts the *Pequod*'s compass so that its measurements are exactly opposite of what they should be. Regardless, Ahab persists in his mission of revenge. Not even the burning of all three masts can sway Ahab from his purpose.

Despite their fears, most of the crew members follow Ahab without comment. The crew becomes more and more homogenous as they are subsumed by Ahab's monomaniacal plan. In their different ways, however, the voices of Fedallah and Starbuck each rise out of the crowd to give Ahab (and you, the reader) another perspective on the ominous signs drawing the *Pequod* toward her final destination. Fedallah predicts that Ahab won't die until he sees two hearses on the sea, and that even then, Ahab can only be killed by hemp. His words give Ahab strange comfort.

In contrast to Fedallah's riddling words, Starbuck provides the voice of reason. He tells his captain, "The gale that now hammers us to stave us, we can turn it into a fair wind that will drive us towards home." In Starbuck's balanced perspective, all the signs suggest that the *Pequod* is going in exactly the wrong direction.

As the Pequod gets closer and closer to its climactic encounter with Moby Dick, the bad omens keep piling up. As Ishmael describes, "now almost the least heedful eye seemed to see some sort of cunning meaning in almost every sight." The crew feels the anticipation, and you as a reader are also drawn in.

Moral dilemmas

Even as more signs arise and *Moby-Dick* nears its violent and climactic ending, Ishmael does not rush ahead to give you a black-and-white description of the novel's main action. Rather, true to form, Ishmael delays describing the *Pequod*'s encounter with the white whale until he can paint a detailed portrait of all of the elements and colors that will give this encounter meaning for us. This portrait includes not only the intense foreshadowing of portents and symbols, but also the moral crises that the characters face.

The musket

Starbuck's conviction that the *Pequod* is doomed places him in a moral predicament: if he saves the crew from certain death by killing Ahab, is he guilty of murder? Outside of Ahab's room, Starbuck weighs the moral arguments, trying to decide if murder could be just: "Is heaven a murderer when its lightning strikes a would-be murderer in his bed, tinding sheets and skin together? And would I be a murderer, then, if. . . ." Although he knows that killing Ahab would bring him back to his family, he cannot bring himself to do so. Throughout the novel Starbuck has been the voice of conscience and reason, and so it makes sense that he cannot descend to the level of Ahab's passionate violence.

Lost sons

Starbuck knows that killing Ahab would likely enable him to see his son. Ahab himself is confronted with a moral choice that is much less murky. When the *Pequod* meets with the *Rachel*, Captain Gardiner implores Ahab to help him find some crew members lost at sea during the pursuit of Moby Dick. Among the missing shipmates are two young men, one of whom is the captain's own son.

There is an unwritten law at sea that all sailors stop and render aid to one another. It is unthinkable that a request to search for missing seamen would be refused no matter the circumstances. Despite this, Ahab's tunnel vision prevents him from giving his attention to anything but his continued pursuit of Moby Dick, and so he refuses to help. Ahab's denial of such an obviously reasonable and human request, as well as defying the laws of the seas upon which they all live, shows you how far he has gone in his pursuit of revenge. Not only do all the omens suggest that the *Pequod* is venturing into uncharted waters, both literally and figuratively, but Ahab's deafness to any kind of human concerns suggests that he is tyrannically and fatally cutting off all civilized relationships as he heads into a spiritual and moral abyss.

The *Pequod* is drawing closer to the end of her journey. You'll observe one last encounter, one last warning to leave the great whale to its own devices before Ahab begins the final chase.

Starbuck's anxiety may remind you of Hamlet trying to decide if he should kill his stepfather, Claudius, while he is praying. Like the melancholy prince, Starbuck is unable to make a decision, and finally leaves the scene with his moral doubts unresolved. This is just one example of Melville using Shakespeare to great effect as the novel reaches a very dramatic climax.

The chase and closing the circle

Yet another encounter with a whaleship brings Ahab closer to his prey, yet the news that he hears from the *Delight* is not good. This whaleship has lost five of its men to Moby Dick, and its captain insists that "the harpoon is not yet forged" that will ever kill the white whale. Ahab persists in his "fatal pride," however, insisting that his harpoon, forged in steel and baptized with pagan blood in the name of the devil, *will* bring home the kill. The *Pequod* plunges on towards the inevitable meeting with Moby Dick.

The prolonged, three-day pursuit of Moby Dick shows Ahab's insistence on following his plan through to the bitter end. Ahab's pride makes him stick to his mission of violence and revenge, but the futility of his quest ultimately underscores man's weakness and folly.

Despite the fact that the crew is following Ahab on his quest for revenge, this is not as much a battle to be fought by the crew of the *Pequod*, but by Ahab and Moby Dick.

The captain's battle

As the men of the *Pequod* pursue Moby Dick, they are increasingly portrayed as one unit, drawn by Fate to their final destiny. As Ishmael records, "they were one man, not thirty . . . all directed to that fatal goal which Ahab their one lord and keel did point to." Towering over the crew, Ahab molds their actions and thoughts to his iron will. So, despite the crew's unity in their pursuit of Moby Dick, Ahab also stands out as the tragic hero determined to fight an individual battle against the white whale. He is the first man on the *Pequod* to spot Moby Dick, and insists that, "Fate reserved the doubloon for me."

Moby Dick, too, seems most interested in waging war with Ahab, destroying his whaleboat on two successive days, and, in a repetition of his previous assault, taking his false leg. Still, as Starbuck insists, it is his captain who forces a match to the death between the *Pequod* and Moby Dick. Guided by his blind fury and overwhelming desire for revenge, Ahab is unable and unwilling to abandon his "fatal goal." He is trapped by his own passion as much as by the workings of "the Fates."

Melville's use of the word "fatal" to describe Ahab's "pride" and his "goal" suggests that Ahab's mission is both fated and doomed. Even as he tyrannically controls the Pequod's men, Ahab suggests that he himself is controlled by the Fates. He tells Starbuck, "Ahab is forever Ahab, man. The whole act's immutably decreed . . . I am the Fates' lieutenant; I act under orders."

Closing the circle

Melville clearly relied on the historical account of the sinking of the *Essex* as he crafted Moby Dick's final clash with the *Pequod*. On the third day of the chase, the crew is frantically trying to repair their damaged boats. The work of their hammers echoes both the spiritual hammers "driving a nail into his [Ahab's] heart," as well as the long-ago pounding of Owen Chase as he, too, tried to repair a stove whaleboat to quickly rejoin the hunt.

The work of these men is similarly futile: their chase finally comes to an end when Moby Dick goes head-to-head with the *Pequod*, attacking it straight on just like the whale that sunk the *Essex* years before. Instead of returning to the ship to deliver a second blow, however, he patiently waits for a personal encounter with his main foe: Ahab.

The prophecies are fulfilled

Ahab thinks that Fedallah's prophecies will give him protection. Instead, of course, they only point the way to his destruction. The two hearses that Ahab must see before he dies end up being the matched warriors of this epic battle: Moby Dick and the *Pequod*. With Fedallah attached to him by a whale-line, Moby Dick is a harbinger of death even as he shows his own invincibility. The *Pequod*, with its American

lumber, is the second hearse; its sinking gives you a great sense of the vulnerability of American ambitions, as the *Pequod* descends into the indifferent ocean, and "the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago."

Although Fedallah's prophecies take in the whole crew of the *Pequod*, Ahab has a special place in them. The captain has been told that only hemp can kill him: yet he himself fulfills his fate with a last, desperate attempt to harpoon Moby Dick. When the whale-line "runs foul" and knocks Ahab out of his boat, you see the captain captured by his own misguided rage. The whale-line that catches Ahab in the neck vividly reminds you of Ishmael's bleak assertion that "All men live enveloped in whale-lines. All are born with halters round their necks."

Despite the bleakness of *Moby-Dick's* ending, all is not death. Alone and metaphorically orphaned, Ishmael rises from the embers of Ahab's wrath. Always the outsider, Ishmael credits his survival to being selected by the "Fates." But although Ishmael's survival marks him out from the rest of the *Pequod's* crew, it also hints at the persistence of deep human connections; Ishmael lives because Queequeg symbolically saves him, in the form of the harpooner's coffin, now a life buoy. The bond that these two men forge at the outset of the novel when they link their fates together persists despite death, or, rather, through it.

The end of the novel reminds you of the ways that Ishmael and Queequeg have been linked before. In Chapter 72, for example, Ishmael is tied to Queequeg during the stripping of a whale's blanket of blubber. At first Ishmael thinks it is an "injustice" that he will share the harpooner's fate, but he later decides that such dependence is "the precise situation of every mortal that breathes."

As the Fates have ordained, Ishmael is rescued by the *Rachel*, the same vessel whose captain implored Ahab to help him search for his lost son. As a student of signs and omens, the significance cannot be lost on Ishmael who must now come to grips with what has happened and find his way in a world that cannot fathom the depth of what he just experienced.

Reverberations

The battle is over. Ahab and those who followed him are gone, along with the *Pequod*. All have perished except Ishmael—who by sheer luck, divine Providence or the will of Queequeg—survived to tell the story and ask the question of "why."

At the end of *Moby-Dick* you are left with more questions: how will the "orphaned" Ishmael find a place in human society? What can his experiences on the outer limits of human existence teach you about human relationships? What is the alternative to Ahab's furious engagement with the world and Ishmael's standoffish attitude? These are the kinds of questions that have reverberated through time, making *Moby-Dick* a novel that still speaks to you today.

Sperm whales today

You might be surprised to learn that today there are approximately two million sperm whales worldwide. Though these immense creatures are still being hunted in Indonesia's Lamalera, they are not in danger of extinction. Tim Severin, author of *In Search of Moby Dick*, estimates that aboriginal hunting of these creatures kills about 40 whales per year, a tiny percentage of their total population. Severin goes on to assert, "The wondrous survivor is, still, a white whale."

It's a sentiment with which Ishmael would agree. In Chapter 105 of *Moby-Dick*, he tells us, "We account the whale immortal in his species, however perishable in his individuality. He swam the seas before the continents broke water; he once swam over the site of the Tuileries, and Windsor Castle and the Kremlin."

In *Moby-Dick*, you have been confronted with forces of nature almost beyond comprehension. You have encountered a creature so mysterious and powerful that it defies all efforts to conquer or even fully understand it, a creature that also makes you question everything you think you know about human society. Yet even as the novel takes you away from the sturdy ground of civilization, it constantly reminds you of the greatest mystery of all: yourself.

Moving forward

Congratulations on completing the course. You've done more than just read *Moby-Dick*. You've taken the time to analyze and critically think about the issues presented in the novel. Many of these issues are as relevant today as they were in nineteenth-century America. Before you move on, complete the assignment and take the quiz to wrap up the course. Then take the lessons you've learned from *Moby-Dick* and apply them to your own life.

*If you'd like to learn more sperm whales, Jonathan Gordon's [Sperm Whales](#) is a good place to begin. This book provides amazing close-up pictures, as well as a number of fascinating facts about whales. On the web, visit the site of public television's award-winning program, *Nature*, which features a page called [Sperm Whales: The Real Moby Dick](#). The site also has abundant links to related sites, including an email discussion group devoted to Melville.*

Lesson 4, Assignment 1: Moving on

Assignment instructions:

You've finished reading *Moby-Dick*, one of the greatest seafaring adventures of all time. In the days and weeks ahead, think about what you learned about the characters and how some of the principles and concepts might apply today. Consider the following:

- What issues did *Moby-Dick* raise for you that are relevant to the social, political or economic realities of the world today?
- What motivates people to follow charismatic leaders even when they know that the outcome is wrong or will not be beneficial?
- Are there still subcultures of society such as the whaling community? How do the subcultures relate to the whole of society?
- Why do some people survive extreme and desperate events while others perish? Do men still have a "halter" around their necks?
- How will you face your own future? Who is in control of your future—you or the Fates?

Good luck! Keep reading. Keep growing. Make your journey a good one.